

MORE BUILDINGS ABOUT SONGS AND FOOD: A CASE STUDY OF
OMAHA'S SLOWDOWN PROJECT

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The success of independent rock music (“indie rock”), once a marginalized sub-genre of the rock idiom and now a globally recognized cultural force, has impacted the urban landscape of Omaha, Nebraska via the mixed-use urban redevelopment project, “Slowdown” — a result of cultural production by the city’s successful indie rock business entities. While geographic research has previously analyzed urban redevelopment initiated by fine artists, the event of indie rock music being a catalyst for urban redevelopment has never been considered in a geographic scope. By examining the topics of affordable technological tools, Omaha’s reduced cost-of-living, and cooperative efforts by city leaders, insight into how an indie rock “scene” can become a successful urban redevelopment catalyst is gained.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Urban America

Even before the end of World War II, urban areas in America started a cycle of decline and rebirth. As a result of the economically debilitating effects of the Great Depression and general neglect during World War II, the major urban areas of America suffered from economic disinvestment and resulting physical dilapidation. In part due to federal policies favorable to developing outlying suburban regions, the population that returned from the war found it attractive to migrate to new communities rapidly being established outside of existing city limits. Concurrent with this new out-migration was the growing decline in breadth and scope of the manufacturing sector of American industry, which had a sizeable footprint in the core of many American cities. In the decades between the end of World War II and the 1970's, many cities registered losses of employment in the manufacturing, wholesale, and retail sectors in the tens of thousands with some marking losses in the hundreds of thousands. However, as the urban morphology of cities changed, so too did the companies located therein. The neo-Fordist era of production enabled companies to decentralize their operations causing a shift in corporate structure enabling command and control operations to grow inside city limits while production and back-office activities were increasingly shifted to the suburbs in search of cheaper land, available labor, and lower tax rates. This new growth in white-collar jobs in city centers allowed for continued economic activity even though most of the employees who filled the positions commuted in from surrounding suburban neighborhoods. Despite the increased presence of white-collar jobs and the burgeoning information revolution at hand, by the mid-70's, public thought leaned towards the perception that cities were dying. And, while that perception was not

entirely off base, what much of the urban blight and de-industrialization brought on was the intense devaluation of large sections of urban America, setting-up opportunities for renewed urban investment and redevelopment (Kleinberg, 1995; Knox and McCarthy, 2005).

Urban redevelopment took many forms that were met with varying degrees of success. One of these forms, the utilization of artistic production as a catalyst for growth, became very successful. Since the mid-70's when New York City began to "gentrify" at the expense of artists, much has changed in the urban redevelopment landscape as well as in the location of artistic production. Urban redevelopment has increased in speed and scope while some forms of artistic production have begun to shift their hubs from traditional cities to the historically untraditional for such processes (Hackworth, 2002; Markusen and King, 2003; Wyly and Hammel, 1999). This thesis will examine how "indie" rock (a form of artistic production relatively new to academic study) and related "scenes" can be catalysts for urban redevelopment. By focusing on "Slowdown," a \$10.2 million dollar mixed-use entertainment-based redevelopment project in the city of Omaha, Nebraska, a clear idea of how a city might leverage its indie rock scene for the benefit of local redevelopment efforts may be gained. Hypotheses in the areas of affordable technological tools, reduced cost-of-living, and government cooperation will serve to help achieve specific insight into the overall process. Knowledge of how an indie rock scene can become a catalyst for urban redevelopment is especially important for small to mid-sized cities; which, as this paper will detail, are becoming more viable as indie rock cultural production hubs, as well as an attractive migration destination for America's young adult demographic (Frey, 2001). The results of this research will also help further the still fledgling discipline of music geography and provide for another avenue of insight in terms of academic thought concerning urban redevelopment and the arts.

Slowdown and Omaha's Urban Redevelopment

The Slowdown urban redevelopment project is a byproduct of the indie rock record label, Saddle Creek Records, which is a byproduct of Omaha's thriving indie rock scene. The project will sit on a former brownfield site owned consecutively by the Union Pacific Railroad and the City of Omaha. Slated to open in summer of 2007 (Fig. 1 – 2), the redevelopment project will cover roughly 56,000 square feet and along with Saddle Creek Records' offices and warehouse space, will consist of a music venue, a (non-profit) two screen cinema, residential and retail space, as well as restaurant, bar/lounge, and coffeehouse components (Fig. 3 – 6). At an estimated completion cost of \$10.2 million, it is being funded through an independent partnership set-up by two of Saddle Creek Records' key employees (one of whom is a former musician in a Saddle Creek band), the label itself, and funding provided by the city. Like the record label that is decidedly independent, efforts are being taken to incorporate Omaha-based tenants that share a like-minded independent ethos when possible. (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006; February 10, 2007).

Urban redevelopment is not a new phenomenon to the city of Omaha, and it has been coinciding with rampant development in the city's western reaches. Omaha's position directly adjacent to the Missouri River dictated its initial development in the 19th century in so much as the city's function as a traditional river port provided for a growth pattern to the north and south of the city's center, well within a manageable distance from the river. However, like many American cities, as the railroad and automobiles became integral modes of transportation for both commercial and personal uses, Omaha began to expand westward in the 1900's. The first major step in redeveloping the city's downtown core came in the 1960's when a collection of buildings once serving as commercial buildings in the city's meat and produce market area



Fig. 1 – 2. Slowdown construction on former brownfield site.



Fig. 3 Slowdown rendering 1.

Source: Saddle Creek Records



Fig. 4 Slowdown rendering 2.

Source: Saddle Creek Records



Fig. 5 Slowdown rendering 3.

Source: Saddle Creek Records



Fig. 6 Slowdown rendering 4.

Source: Saddle Creek Records

were saved from demolition. This area's preservation, which occurred decades before "preservation" and "adaptive reuse" were common terms across America, can be attributed to one family. The Mercer family owns a substantial amount of the real estate properties comprising the area, and in the 1960's decided it would make for a good mixed-use urban location (Andersen, 2007). "Old Market," as the area was titled, is now a bustling collection of buildings with bars, restaurants, shops, offices, and residential lofts being represented in the mix (Fig. 7 – 10).

The 1970's were witness to a continued focus on redevelopment efforts in the downtown area typified by the Gene Leahy Mall, a green space promenade. These efforts provided open space connecting the core of downtown to the Missouri River with the intent to encourage Omaha residents and commerce to return to or remain in the areas near the river — an attempt to balance continuing westward expansion. By the 1980's, redevelopment was in full swing, and in the ensuing decades, office towers, corporate headquarters, lofts, hotels, federal buildings, streetscape improvements, art museums, and a successful arena and convention center came to fruition. Concurrent with this period of urban redevelopment is former Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey's "Back to the River" campaign, which includes such riverfront improvements as bike trails, open spaces, and a proposed pedestrian bridge. This redevelopment campaign is designed to reestablish the importance of the Missouri River in the new economic landscape of Omaha ("Greater Omaha," 2006). It should be noted that while the redevelopment projects were a mix of public and private financing, many of the projects received a majority of their funding from the private sector as a result of an atmosphere in Omaha wherein there is a "staggering amount of corporate philanthropy" (R. Moseman, personal communication, February 9, 2007).

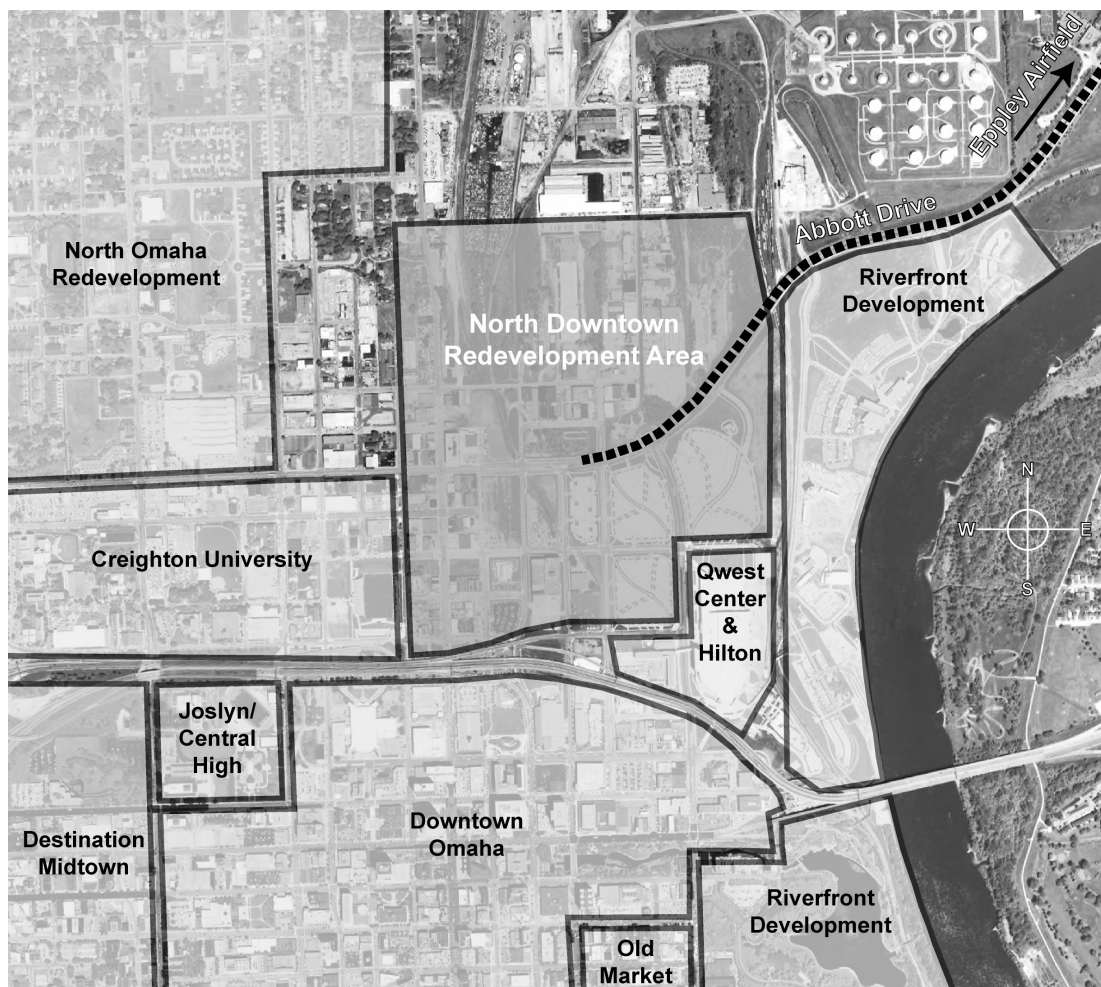


Fig. 7 – 8. Old Market.



Fig. 9 – 10. Old Market.

The importance of redeveloping the eighty-block area of what city leaders dub “North Downtown” (where Slowdown will be located) can be illustrated by looking at a map of the corresponding area and how it relates to the city at large (Map 1). After visitors arrive at Eppley Airfield, the most direct route to enter the city and subsequently, its downtown core, is via Abbott Drive. This route takes the traveler through the North Downtown area thus making it Omaha’s “front door,” yet still the “hole in the donut” when taken in context with surrounding redevelopment successes (“Greater Omaha,” 2006: 8). North Downtown is currently filled with what are largely shuttered factories, pawnshops, decrepit rooming houses, and large expanses of open space (Fig. 11 – 18).



Map 1. Location of North Downtown area in relation to downtown core.

Since the North Downtown area is comprised of a considerable amount of land that was formerly industrial, an assessment was needed to ascertain what areas, if any, might be considered brownfields requiring remediation to once again be used for development. The combining of a Supplemental EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant and an Economic Development Agency Grant (as well as funding from the City and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce) helped city leaders launch North Downtown redevelopment plans. The City and the Chamber combined resources to perform an eighteen-month planning process that culminated in a distinct vision for the area in question. The results of this planning process offered an ambitious vision for the future of the area:

...it was determined that North Downtown should evolve into Omaha's newest and most exciting neighborhood. This neighborhood will be unlike any that currently exists within the metropolitan area. Instead of being auto-oriented and dominated by large set-backs, surface parking lots, and one or two uses, this area will transform, over time, into a very lively, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented urban neighborhood. This neighborhood will develop around two main corridors. Sixteenth Street will evolve into a major north-south mixed-use, pedestrian oriented corridor, while Webster Street, which links Creighton University with the Riverfront, will evolve into the major east-west mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented corridor. The intersection of these two corridors will be North Downtown's "100% corner," and is the preferred location for a large pioneering project or land use anchor such as a multi-block residential project, a new museum, or a community ballpark. Other significant features identified in the plan include an artist live/work district, an office/light industrial district, and a corporate headquarters/urban office park site ("Greater Omaha," 2006: 1).

In this proposed scenario, both the City and the Chamber are looking to Slowdown as a leading piece of the entire redevelopment puzzle. Slowdown is the project that is “setting the tempo and scale” for the area, and it will serve as a co-focal point, along with the existent Qwest Center, for the area’s entertainment options (K. Johnson, personal communication, June 28, 2006; R. Maglinger, personal communication, February 9, 2007).



Figures 11 - 12. Existing structures in North Downtown area.



Figures 13 - 14. Existing structures in North Downtown area.



Figures 15 - 16. Existing structures in North Downtown area.



Figures 17 - 18. Existing structures in North Downtown area.

Saddle Creek Records

In 1993, what is now known as Saddle Creek Records began as Lumberjack Records with a group of friends in Omaha recording and selling 100 copies of a cassette tape by a local teenager, Conor Oberst. This collection of friends constituted an informal cultural production agglomeration that is commonly referred to as a “music scene” or more simply, “scene.” As is standard in music scenes focusing on indie rock, this one was comprised of musicians, fans, and entrepreneurs all working in a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) nature volunteering to facilitate the creation of music (Bennett and Peterson, 2004). Within a few months, many of the principals involved in the scene and the barely formed label relocated one hour west of Omaha to Lincoln, home of the University of Nebraska. This move did not impede the fledgling label, but served to extend their small cultural production agglomeration in a manner that afforded for new linkages in production and performance as well as to develop a widening group of listeners and participants. While continuing to form bands, play shows, and release a handful of recordings, the Omaha scene began to flourish with the original members still actively involved albeit with some of them living in Lincoln. During the course of a few years, along with several Saddle Creek releases, three of the bands involved in the scene released albums on significant independent record labels outside of Omaha. These releases along with touring helped garner the bands some national recognition. Despite dealing with labels outside of Omaha, the consensus amongst the musicians was that ideally, they would be able to eventually release their subsequent works on Saddle Creek.

With the scene continuing to build momentum, the loose group of musicians that helped spawn the label (and continued to have a hand in its direction whether they were directly recording for it or not) reached a decision and official leadership was established. A partnership

was legally formed between two of the people most interested in the business aspect of the label. Although eventually one of the partners opted out of the agreement to spend more time on playing and recording, within a short time period, the label began to release a string of increasingly more successful albums by Omaha and Lincoln musicians with the label and scene becoming geographically centered once again on Omaha. In the ensuing years, albums by Omaha bands began to receive national and international accolades, registering continually higher sales figures, and establishing Omaha and Saddle Creek Records as icons in the independent rock world (Kulbel and Walters, 2005).

Saddle Creek Records was at first a byproduct of Omaha's independent ("indie") rock scene. Now, it is a driving force. The nature and scope of Omaha's indie rock scene is no different than many others with the basic building blocks of participants, venues, performers, a studio, and a label all represented over the scene's continuing time-span of increasing worldwide recognition and success. Connell and Gibson note that "the most famous scenes (those responsible for distinct 'sounds') have all built upon local popular support (or at least cult status), and featured particularly vibrant combinations of venues, local production, and methods of information flow and exchange..." (Connell and Gibson, 2003: 102). To elaborate further, when placed in context of Johansson and Bell's (2005) consideration of geographic, cultural, and economic factors for scene development, Omaha meets much of the proposed criteria proposed as integral to scene development in the United States. Omaha's location is ideal for touring both coasts as well as making trips to Chicago and back with stops at other Midwestern markets. The size of the city is small enough to foster participant interaction and cooperation; but, large enough to support venues and record stores that operate as their respective businesses along with providing a "third place" for scene participants to meet and informally transfer knowledge

(Oldenburg, 1997). These third places help foster the development of a “network of learning” suggested by Johansson and Bell that scene members use to help one another with their projects from trading tips on playing and touring to utilizing each other’s band members for different projects altogether. In addition, the major ingredient of scene creation, a university, was present due to the ease of information and cultural flows between the Omaha and Lincoln.

What sets Saddle Creek Records apart from other successful indie rock labels is that not only are a majority of the acts on the label part of a social network that originated during high school years, but to date, the majority of these acts who have been offered more lucrative deals from larger independent labels and corporately owned “major labels” have refused them. The impetus behind these decisions is so their recorded output can support the label as well as the other bands also signed to it. Label owner, Robb Nansel elaborates:

The birth of Saddle Creek doesn’t seem all that unique to me. It seems like as in many other cities, Omaha has a pretty specific group of people that sort of bonded together through mutual interests in music and started playing together in bands. I think the thing that possibly makes Omaha’s bands — or at least the bands that we deal with — unique is the persistence and dedication that the musicians have shown. Everyone continued to produce music for years and years and eventually people outside of our circle started to take notice. It seems that in a lot of scenes, the bands break up before they really get started, no matter how great they are.... Everyone has sort of remained true to the collective idea. We sort of started with a communistic approach to growing the label and the group of bands, so any success that one person/group gets is always viewed as beneficial to the whole (Smith, 2004).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indie Rock and Technology

Indie rock has come of age in the 21st century as a culturally and economically successful sub-genre of the rock idiom that may encompass musical forms as disparate as hip hop and folk to heavy metal and jazz. Sprouting from the seeds planted by punk rock and subsequently developing various communication, distribution, and touring networks in its wake, the individuals involved in the growth of “indie rock” have accomplished everything largely without the involvement of corporately owned “major” record labels, hence the term “independent” or “indie” (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Straw, 1991). Author Ryan Hibbett goes so far as to succinctly state that, “The simplest, most benign definition of indie rock is that which is not produced by a major record label...” (Hibbett, 2005). Although the recent mainstream success of several indie rock bands that share common stylistic traits has shifted the title of “indie” from an encompassing whole to a more narrow description of sonic style, indie rock music is still commonly referred to as a sub genre of rock music (Coyle, 2005).

By the mid-80’s, the cultural production hubs or “music scenes” of the indie movement (sometimes freely interchanged with the term, “alternative rock”) were mixed geographically between the traditional, Los Angeles, CA, New York, NY, San Francisco, CA and the burgeoning, Athens, GA, Washington DC, and Minneapolis, MN. (Map 2) Although powerful in its own right, the indie community still did not have enough clout to propel its own kind into widespread mainstream success. Thomas Bell (1998) brings to light the paradoxical situation of how a major record label actually helped catapult the indie rock movement into the national consciousness. With the Seattle-based indie record label Sub Pop Records teetering on the edge

of bankruptcy, the David Geffen Company (DGC) bought out the rest of the contract for the band Nirvana and proceeded to create such an all-encompassing marketing campaign for the band's 1991 release, *Nevermind* that it was hard for anyone even tangentially aware of popular music not to be informed about the Seattle music scene, the legacy of indie rock, and what radio personnel started to term, "grunge." Due to the exposure Nirvana's eventual multi-platinum success afforded the indie rock sub genre and culture, many other indie labels, bands, and entrepreneurs were able to position themselves in the national marketplace with great success (Azerrad, 2001, Schoemer, 1993). Today, as a result of a higher profile for the genre, indie record labels in geographically untraditional cultural production hubs are thriving. For example, the combined sales figure for all releases from Saddle Creek Records has well surpassed the million mark and continues to climb (J. Kulbel, personal communication, September 6, 2006).

Concurrent to the rise in popularity of indie rock, technological changes in the music industry also favored the sub-genre. Over the past decade, there has been much written about the role of technology in leveling the playing field between major labels and indie labels. The crux of this literature (Alexander, 2002; Fox, 2004; Graham, et al., 2004; Jones, 2002; McLeod, 2005) is that the ability to transfer music across the Internet in digital format either for distribution or promotion is serving to undermine the traditional dominance the major labels in these areas. Alexander (2002) states the importance of distribution and promotion by stating, "Much of the dominance achieved by larger firms in the industry results from their control over the distribution and promotion of the products of the industry."



Map 2. Location of indie rock cultural production hubs by decade of initial impact.

(Source: Azerrad, 2001; Blush, 2001; Cauthon, 2005; Kruse, 1993; Lloyd, 2004; Petty, 2005; Seiler, 2001; Tough, 1993)

This thought is refined further by Andrew McLeod (2005) who looks specifically at how the MP3 file format has drastically altered the competitive landscape of the music industry in favor of the independent label. He asserts that due to technology, the making and distribution of music has become much less a realm of major labels and more accessible to all, going so far as to contemplate that digital distribution may be what ends market dominance by major labels. This shifting of power via technology that McLeod discusses is documented in the distribution and marketing sense by both Ganz (2005) and Green (2004) who profile two indie bands that recently bypassed traditional distribution and marketing channels, meeting with widespread commercial success. In addition, McLeod observes that recording quality of product at levels once reserved for well financed major labels is now easily duplicated via technology for the majority of indie rock artists — this observation being supported in articles by Hearn, Ninan, Rogers, Cunningham, and Luckman, (2004) and Salamon, (1998). While some researchers find the outlook to be grim for the market dominating four major labels, others see the potential for mutually beneficial partnerships to arise. Both Christman (2004) and Hearn, et al detail the opportunities and strategies available wherein major labels make available their resources to indies interested in forging relationships.

The success that indie rock has garnered for the artists and entrepreneurs involved has recently spawned redevelopment projects in the urban areas in which these indie labels and scenes reside, funded and directed by the labels and artists themselves (Brown, 2005; Haarlander, 2005). Unlike the manipulation of fine artists, though, the emerging paradigm of this redevelopment is one that is artist led as opposed to simply artist fed.

The Arts, Urban Redevelopment, and the Need for Space

As Richard Lloyd states, “Modern cities were never only locations for industrial production, but have long included arenas for cultural production and consumption (albeit limited)” (Lloyd, 2001). Nowhere was this more evident than in New York City during the late 60’s and early 70’s. With the growing decentralization of industry freeing massive amounts of former industrial spaces and the art world becoming more mainstream and attracting more people to the profession, the industrial loft spaces left vacant by former manufacturing concerns became attractive for working artists who needed inexpensive space to live and work. The space was cheap (even by New York standards at that time) and the geographically clustered abundance of it was perfectly suited for the artist looking to become part of a like-minded community. What may not have been so readily apparent was the fact that New York City arts communities such as SoHo, the East Village, and the Lower East Side were able to flourish as creative communities not for a lack of interest, or apparent oversight by government and financial players, but because of uncertainty of how to proceed with development by said players. Sharon Zukin illuminates this common misperception of artists being lone pioneers, transitioning decaying New York City neighborhoods as an act of simple supply and demand:

The development of the loft market in the 1960’s and 1970’s was thoroughly intertwined with such forms of state intervention in the economy as federal tax structure, local tax incentives like J-51, urban redevelopment plans, the expansion of state employment for the artists, the quantum leap in state support for the arts through grants, local laws like zoning resolutions and building codes, and local political initiatives to ‘preserve’ neighborhoods through increased residential use. By this late point in capitalist

economies probably no real estate market develops without state intervention (Zukin, 1982: 17).

In fact, the artists weren't so much pioneers in this redevelopment scenario as they were "gentronauts," indirectly subsidized by the government and investors to explore the outer reaches of an urban world alien to the majority of New York City denizens, all the while making the seemingly uninhabitable attractive to those that would normally eschew such neighborhoods. Neil Smith concurs with Zukin's outlook and brings to light the role that private investment had on the process by relaying that it was widely speculated that the landlords in NYC's "East Village" artificially kept rents low to entice artists, then raised them stratospherically once the cluster formed and thrived as they knew that, "art tamed the neighborhood, refracting back a mock pretense of exotic, but benign danger" which the eventual upscale residents found to their liking (Smith, 1996: 19). This multi-faceted exploration process set the stage for the long wave of artist-fed gentrification in the 1980's that extended from Manhattan to Hoboken, and points beyond (Cole, 1987). While there were some artists who were able to invest in the neighborhoods they helped turn-around, most became involved in a continual cycle of displacement. It is important to note that while the success of New York City's redevelopment efforts via the manipulation of artistic forces is the most popular example of its kind, it is not the only city to contemplate such processes as both Dallas and Los Angeles considered similar redevelopment plans in the 1960's (Zukin, 1982).

While gentrification processes continued in many American cities, Hackworth (2002) and Wyly and Hammel (1999) argue that the gentrification process itself changed after the 1991 recession. This set the stage for an economic shift in cities that is now displacing artists on a much larger geographic scale. Gentrified neighborhoods once considered "islands of renewal in

seas of decay,” have steadily grown in scope and number now inverting the phrase with blighted sections of cities becoming “islands of decay in seas of renewal.” Hackworth explains the new upswing in gentrification as the result of corporate players initiating the process, continuing governmental involvement, the further marginalizing of opposition, and the economics of land use changing due to the success of initial waves of gentrification. In New York City as well as in many other American cities, neighborhoods previously unthinkable as candidates for gentrification have either completed the process or are in the throes of it (Hackworth; Wyly and Hammel). Tempering this enthusiastic assessment of gentrifying cities is Dr. Brian J. L. Berry whose piece “Islands of Renewal in Seas of Decay” served as the starting point for Wyly and Hammel’s examination. In response to the authors’ work, Berry claimed that the time series was not long enough nor the random sample of cities broad enough to warrant the authors’ suggestions that gentrification was spreading at an accelerated rate. Berry, however, did concede that the process is still occurring (Berry, 1999).

In addition to this continuing new wave of gentrification, general market forces have served to create an urban housing market in many cities that is becoming financially unattainable to all but the wealthy. Since the turn of the 21st century, many American cities once home to thriving cultural production hubs have transformed into what Joel Kotkin terms, “ephemeral cities” with housing costs so high that they are beginning to serve as “playpens for the idle rich.” He further notes that the high cost of housing is feeding the continuing out-migration to the suburbs. This residential shift is also affecting business location as executives are increasingly having trouble staffing companies within city limits due to high housing costs for potential employees (Kotkin, 2005, 2006). The impact that the new urban housing economy has on artists and cultural production is beginning to be studied with greater frequency. Through his

submersion in Chicago's "Wicker Park" neighborhood at the time of its gentrification, Richard Lloyd (2004) was able to grasp the nature of artistic production and the critical ingredients it needs if it is to flourish in an urban center; perhaps the most important ingredient of which is an inexpensive place to live and work. Lloyd's observation that, "cities such as New York and San Francisco, traditional leaders in cultural production, currently evince a cost of living quite daunting for often poorly paid cultural aspirants" falls in line with Kotkin's thoughts while also supporting research Markusen and King (2003) completed acknowledging an artist's need for affordable living and work space. In "The Artistic Dividend: The Art's Hidden Contributions to Regional Development," these authors advance the concept that artists are integral pieces to a city's overall economic health and offer public policy suggestions in order to facilitate their growth in increasingly expensive urban areas. The artist's need for affordability combined with the new hyper-gentrification and ephemeral-ization of many cities leads to the question: will traditional cultural production and producers migrate? Markusen and King provide speculation that cultural production is already dispersing to formerly untraditional production hubs, but they stop short of reasoning why that production is moving.

With the documented changes in the speed and scope of urban redevelopment strategies acting to marginalize artist communities even further and faster, and indie rock becoming an economic force vital to the urban areas it inhabits, it is important to consider the analysis that geographers John Connell and Chris Gibson provide concerning the development of music scenes:

...there should be a 'critical mass' of active musicians or fans, and a set of physical infrastructures of recording, performance and listening: studios, venues (with sympathetic

booking agents) — spaces that allow new musical practices — and even record companies... (Connell and Gibson, 2003: 101 - 102).

Like the fine arts agglomerations in New York City and elsewhere, indie rock scenes are dependent on space, and as Richard Lloyd (2004) and Markusen and King (2003) observed, that space has to be inexpensive. Mainstream journalist, Gina Arnold (2000) cuts to the chase with the title of her *New York Times* piece, “Rock Was Never Meant to be in the High Rent District.” As cities functioning as traditional cultural production hubs become too expensive for artists and indie rock scenes, and urban redevelopment scenarios led by indie rock entities come to fruition, it will be advantageous for the representatives of the metropolitan areas that demographer William Frey (2001) dubs “Young Adult Magnets” to be aware of resources needed for the development of successful indie rock agglomeration economies in their cities.

Public Policy and Rock Music in America

The literature regarding public policy initiatives and popular music in America is anemic at best. Holly Kruse utilizes this observation to begin her piece on the subject by stating, “An area of neglect in popular music studies — most noticeably in popular music studies in the United States — has been the relationship between popular music studies, the market, and the state” (Kruse, 1998: 187). Coming from an economic development angle, Richard Florida reasons that music is a viable asset in the marketing of cities. He goes on to document the indie rock scenes in Seattle and Chappell Hill as examples of how cultural production outside of the fine arts has identified and helped market urban areas in their quest for economic development. He states, “...finding ways to help support a local music scene can be just as important as investing in high-tech business and far more effective than building a downtown mall” (Florida,

2002: 229). In his study of Wicker Park, Richard Lloyd also includes the successful music scene based in the neighborhood as one of the main elements in its redevelopment and gentrification (Lloyd, 2004). However, although Florida recommends that city leaders embrace indie rock music scenes, what government can do to foster one is somewhat unclear. Kruse supports this with a line of reasoning that due to the historically “laissez-faire” nature in the way scenes develop, there really isn’t anything expected of local governments by those intrinsic to the process. Like Florida, however, Kruse is cognizant of how, in the wake of Seattle, Athens, Minneapolis, and Austin, governmental involvement in scene development could lead to potential marketing benefits for the city in question (Kruse).

While Kruse struggles to unearth any meaningful research completed concerning public policy and popular music in America, she has no trouble pointing to the body of work completed on the subject in reference to England. Sara Cohen, the director of the Institute of Popular Music at the University of Liverpool, explores in depth the potential for and the results of state involvement in popular music. Of note is the author’s observations that while state intervention is becoming more attractive to government officials, who once only considered classical music in their public policy measures, it is important to recognize that private parties may feel that direct state intervention creates an unfair playing field and can largely hamper work done at the local level due to the lack of first-hand knowledge of the music industry by government officials. Cohen further details various attempts at state supported music initiatives in Liverpool that failed or were not attempted due to lack of cooperation and a schism between local entities and government representatives (Cohen, 2001). Simon Frith puts similar sentiments forth in his examination of how public policy regarding rock music plays out internationally. Along with the inherent political nature of intertwining public funding with music, Frith further points out that

from the point of view of the artist and entrepreneur, “the suspicion remains that once the state gets in on the act, the meaning of rock — as an aggressively commercial music with an unpredictable cultural edge — is bound to change” (Frith, 1993: 21).

John Street analyzes the same territory as Cohen and Frith, but on a more micro level, considering the development and effects of a state supported venue. Street documents the state initiated redevelopment of a former brewery in a mixed-use area of Norwich, England. The process of said redevelopment is at best a quagmire involving too much state interaction and differing political agendas. Street’s focused look does bring to light the many other ways that a government’s public policy influences live music and subsequently the formation of a music scene. Like Kruse, Street points out that more pedestrian items such as the ease of obtaining licenses for operation and liquor sales, noise ordinance enforcement, and relations with police and fire departments are important to consider when discussing the development of music scenes and their impact on the urban landscape (Kruse, 1998; Street, 1993).

Ultimately, it is important to take into consideration many differing factors when analyzing any aspect of music. As just one element of the human experience, music is not only a product or a resulting effect, but can be an instigating force as well. Sara Cohen identified this need for a “holistic approach” when considering how music and public policy interact, noting that “practices and discourses need to be examined across a range of intersecting contexts and networks (whether they involve music or not) in order to make sense of the meaning derived from music within one particular setting” (Cohen, 1993: 135).

CHAPTER III

HYPOTHESES

To answer the larger question of how does an indie rock scene become a catalyst for urban redevelopment, three hypotheses were developed. Each hypothesis corresponds directly to one of the three main areas of the literature reviewed: indie rock and technology, arts-led urban redevelopment, and the interplay between public policy and rock music. Since the Slowdown urban redevelopment project is the specific unit of analysis, the three main areas of literature reviewed were evaluated and then re-framed in regards to Omaha, the city's political leaders, the city's indie rock scene, and the success of Saddle Creek Records. The following hypotheses were the result of that process:

Affordable Technological Tools were a Factor in the Economic Success of Saddle Creek Records

Many indie rock record labels are thriving financially from geographically untraditional locations in terms of cultural production and the recording industry. According to articles both academic and mainstream (Alexander, 2002; Fox, 2004; Ganz, 2005; Graham, et al., 2004; Green, 2004; Jones, 2002; McLeod, 2005; Salamon, 1998), the Internet along with digital audio production tools have radically altered the music industry for producer and entrepreneur alike. With this technologically charged scenario still unfolding, these new tools may have already altered the competitive landscape so much that they are an important factor in an indie rock label such as Saddle Creek Records being able to succeed financially by competing globally with traditional major labels.

A Reduced Cost-of-Living is of Significant Importance in the Retention of Cultural Producers in Omaha

Joel Kotkin (2005, 2006) suggests many American cities are experiencing a rapid rise in cost-of-living that is serving to marginalize those that are not wealthy. Included in these cities are ones traditionally thought of as cultural production hubs (Lloyd, 2004). Also proposed by the reviewed literature is the thought that artistic producers need affordable space in which to work and create (Lloyd, Markusen and King, 2003). This leads to the question of whether or not Omaha's lower cost of living was instrumental in the retention of the cultural producers involved in its indie rock scene.

Representatives of the City of Omaha were Cooperative in the Slowdown Redevelopment Process

Although author Holly Kruse (1998) notes in America how little recognition indie rock scenes gain from the governing bodies of the cities in which they occupy, clearly representatives from Omaha were aware of the indie scene in their city and its potential to serve as an urban redevelopment catalyst. In light of prior research, however, the level of involvement by city officials needs to be ascertained. Prior studies have shown that too much involvement is problematic. Yet for a \$10.2 million dollar building to be built, a more than cursory involvement by the city must have been present.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

As the phenomenon being studied was entirely independent of research control and the results of the posed hypotheses would help answer a larger question falling into the realm of “how,” a case study method was used in the execution of this research project. The case study method allowed for diverse means of gathering data, which in this particular situation was highly applicable due to distance between subject and observer and popularity of the subject. Unlike other scientific methods of research, the case study method can rely solely on previously published historical data if appropriate, with additional augmentation via qualitative research as well.

...case studies are a form of inquiry that does *not* depend solely on ethnographic or participant-observer data. You could even do a valid and high-quality case study without leaving the library and the telephone or Internet, depending on the topic being studied (Yin, 2003: 11).

Falling in line with the proposed case study methodology, the popular culture nature of the subject matter and the participants involved allowed for a voluminous amount of existing information in the public record concerning the proposed subject. In addition to the historical data available, a truncated (for reasons discussed below) ethnographic approach to gathering information was taken. Specifically, field research and corresponding techniques that are outlined in Earl Babbie’s *The Practice of Social Research* were utilized as the nature of Saddle Creek Records and Omaha’s indie rock scene may be categorized as entities that are a “work group” (Saddle Creek Records) as well as a “friendship clique,” (Saddle Creek Records and Omaha’s indie rock scene) with both determinations falling under the larger subset of “groups”

(Babbie, 1992). By engaging in “unstructured” and “semi-structured” interviewing, subjects from Saddle Creek Records, participants in Omaha’s indie rock scene, and individuals representing the city of Omaha provided the insights needed to analyze the redevelopment project in question (Babbie; Bernard, 1988).

While the public officials who served as study participants were not too difficult to gain access to, when considering the participants involved in the indie rock area of this study, two main hurdles presented themselves. The first hurdle was distance; roughly 700 miles separated observer from that being observed. As Sara Cohen has emphasized when conducting ethnographic research in the realm of music, it is important to have a large amount of close interaction with the study participants (Cohen, 1993). Due to the distance involved, that was not possible. Although technology partially compensated for the distance, with interviews being conducted via telephone and the Internet, there remained challenges in gathering data. Not being in close proximity to the subject matter resulted in an overall lost opportunity to be familiar enough to the study participants that I would be granted opportunities to be engaged in heightened social interaction. By being a more familiar presence in Omaha’s indie rock scene, I may have been afforded opportunities for deeper lines of questioning and the potential to be introduced to more subjects. This bridges into the second hurdle I needed to clear... access to participants. Currently, Omaha’s scene is one of global recognition. Many involved in its creation and continued success are public figures that network with friends and business associates (often times also successful indie rock musicians and entrepreneurs) far removed from the general public, creating an insular network to those outside of Omaha and the workings of indie rock in general.

One way I overcame this hurdle and cleared the first one was to leverage my position as a participant in the indie rock movement. Like Robert Craig Strachan who found starting his own DIY micro-indie label, “allowed for a certain insiderness that might have been otherwise unattainable” (Strachan, 2002: 22), my ongoing immersion in the network of indie rock as an artist and DIY entrepreneur in Denton, Texas allowed for me to achieve a certain “insiderness” as music scenes are increasingly both place-specific as well as translocal due in large part to the Internet (Johansson and Bell, 2005). Like Omaha, Denton, Texas has a thriving indie rock scene, which allowed me the ability to interact with musicians from Omaha (who routinely stop in Denton on tour) as both a participant as well as an observer with the Internet serving as a pipeline for communication concerning both areas.

It is important to note that while much of the qualitative data collected for this case study was acquired by technological means or through meetings off-site, I was able to conduct field research in Omaha to gain a better sense of place and familiarity with the geographic scope of the subject. My field research trips were results of both financial support via the university as well as through my participation as an artist in the translocal network of indie rock scenes. This is important as although the subject matter is largely historical in nature, i.e. the development of Omaha’s indie rock scene as well as the genesis of Saddle Creek Records, aspects of the phenomenon are still taking shape in the timeframe of the research with the continuing construction of Slowdown and the broader redevelopment of Omaha’s North Downtown area. In regards to conducting field work concerning case studies that are of both a historical and current nature, Yin states that, “...some relevant behaviors or environmental conditions will be available for observation. Such observations serve as yet another source of evidence in a case study” (Yin, 2003: 92).

The instruments of measurement in this case study were questionnaires utilized in both face-to-face settings and via communication technology (See Appendix). Interviews suited this research scenario best as through them, a longer timeframe was enabled allowing for the most information to be culled from the members of the sample population (Table 1). Additionally, as Clower (2006) points out, one can, in the moment, clarify questions, probe deeper on a particular question, or redirect questioning altogether if a new avenue presents itself – all of the aforementioned options being rendered moot in a mail survey. It should be noted, however, that the questions posed to the musician in the sample were not as part of an interview but in a mail survey format delivered via a MySpace “message.” Granted, significant familiarity between the administer of the survey and the subject had been established before the survey was sent. This familiarity was through face-to-face contact as well as by various communication technologies.

Being that the case study methodology was used which allows for the inclusion of data from historical and previously published sources, some of the sample participants were not contacted by the observer, but had already expounded upon questions in the public record similar in nature and scope to those posed by the observer in interviews. These subjects were then added to the sample population, but are noted by an asterisk in Table 1.

To correctly analyze the qualitative data that was accumulated, ongoing summary methods were used in order to concentrate the information presented and make it easily handled for comparison (i.e., looking for trends, key words) to both other qualitative data accumulated during the course of research as well qualitative data accumulated and analyzed by previous researchers (Bernard, 1988). This process also falls in line with suggestions made by Sara Cohen in relation to ethnographic research and its relation to the field of music:

Ethnography is meaningless in the absence of theory, but theoretical models are not simply imposed on field situations and data; rather, they provide an orientation to the research which can be developed by the researcher over the course of analyzing data. This allows one to begin to develop theory in a way that provides much more evidence of plausibility of different lines of analysis than is available to the armchair theorist or survey researcher (Cohen, 1993: 133).

Table 1

Interview Subjects Comprising Study Sample Population

Subject	Position
Jason Kulbel	Label Manager: Saddle Creek Records
Rachel Jacobson	Founder and Director: Film Streams
Paul Landow	Chief of Staff: Office of the Mayor of Omaha
Ken Johnson	Economic Development Manager: City of Omaha
Rod Moseman	Vice President: Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce
Rob Maglinger	Business Development Representative: Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce
Steve Bartolomei	Omaha musician
Joel Peterson*	Omaha musician
Chris Hughes*	Omaha musician

* answered questions outside of study in public record

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

With the methodology in place, testing the hypotheses revealed mixed results. Overall, initial conclusions were supported concerning technology, cost-of-living, and governmental interaction. However, in light of the literature surveyed, testing produced results that were unexpected in the areas of technology and cost-of-living. Results deviated so much from expectations in terms of cost-of-living that new literature is introduced in order to provide the proper framework for analyzing the results. To a lesser degree, technology provided results that heavily favored one aspect over others which challenged the literature reviewed. In terms of the public policy nature of governmental interaction, results were as expected; and, like the other areas of inquiry, generated opportunities for further research questioning.

Affordable Technological Tools were a Factor in the Economic Success of Saddle Creek Records

With a more efficient profit sharing model, indie rock labels are comparatively more economically sound than major labels; however, major labels historically have had a tight grip on production, marketing, and distribution of product either through outright ownership (being vertically integrated in most cases) or their influence raising costs for services to a level where few indies could compete (McLeod, 2005). Recent technological advances such as the Internet, though, have allowed for indie rock labels and their bands to reach much larger audiences via online distribution, peer-to-peer networking, and general marketing activities while digital production tools have enabled bands to produce a major label comparable product for a fraction of the cost (McLeod).

Affordable technological tools were definitely a factor in the developmental years of Saddle Creek Records and in their ability to stay based in Omaha. These tools also allowed for the label to grow and reach its current level of success. However, the way in which technology was most influential was not in the way that one may think of first when considering music and technology. In terms of starting Saddle Creek Records, along with marketing of their bands, the Internet had a function that was barely addressed in most literature regarding recent technological changes in the music industry — as a facilitator of inexpensive communication. As the business landscape for indie rock labels is becoming increasingly aspatial, Saddle Creek Records is one of many labels that are almost completely vertically disintegrated. While still independently owned and operated, they have a distribution deal with the major-label-owned Alternative Distribution Alliance whose headquarters are in New York, but have points of contact for the label in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Denver. Representatives in New York City handle most of the label's publicity, and their product is pressed in Salt Lake City, Utah. Add in the fact that their bands are most often touring across the country, and the need for an efficient, cheap communication avenue to ensure success becomes readily apparent. Saddle Creek Records Label Manager, Jason Kulbel explains:

It (technology) certainly is a big factor of where we are at this point. There is no doubt about that. You can trace it to things like file sharing, or people downloading MP3s off of our site, getting dates off of our site.... But it has played a big role in the expansion of the label through something as simple as e-mail. You know, not having to pay to make phone calls... so I think the Internet has been a huge help.... But, really, the biggest benefit of the Internet is to keep costs down for us. Especially, especially, five or six years ago when we had zero dollars (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006).

Having much less of an impact on Saddle Creek Records' success is online distribution. Distribution of product has historically been the most monopolized aspect of the recording industry by major labels and one of the most speculated to change dramatically in scope by analysts (Fox, 2004; Jones, 2002). While online retailers such as Apple's iTunes eliminate the need for a physical product and allow a music customer to buy (via downloading onto one's computer) a digital copy of a song or an album, the effects of this disintermediation noted by Jones and facilitated by technology have not yet yielded a large impact on Saddle Creek Records. Online distribution is still just a "dent" in the overall picture for label sales with an estimated 90-93% of Saddle Creek Records' releases sold as physical product. Despite this current lack of impact, label management acknowledges that online distribution will begin to command more of their sales share and continuing efforts are being made to monitor what the label predicts as an eventual shift in distribution practices for the company. One example of this monitoring is the label's consideration of warehouse space allocation for physical product in the Slowdown redevelopment project at five and ten year mile-markers (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006).

Having more of an immediate impact are the technological changes in the tools used to record the music that Saddle Creek Records releases. It has been observed that because of digital recording processes, new bands are able to record at a fraction of the cost once associated with producing a product that was on par with major label output, thus increasing the profit margin for both the label and the bands:

Recording for our bigger bands always seems to get more expensive somehow, but the entry level is lower and that is great. That really helps out someone like Ladyfinger for example. They've still probably spent about five grand on their recording, but have a

\$25,000 recording. I don't know how you put a number on that anymore, but it sounds really great. The dollars don't match the sound, which is good (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006).

Kulbel elaborates further on the subject and ties together the impending future relationship amongst technology, production, and distribution in terms of how disintermediation will affect Saddle Creek Records:

...just being able to for free, or almost nothing, put out a record. A band could get a ProTools rig and record it themselves in their home and put the record out through iTunes and our expense at that point would be extremely low. It's kind of the shifting role of distribution and also kind of the shifting role of the label, really (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006).

While affordable technological tools are enabling Saddle Creek Records to fit into Joel Kotkin's concept of a "neo-Renaissance diversification of function" by operating in a decentralized manner, the company extends the concept in effect by not requiring a large labor pool and interacting with its satellite suppliers via communication technologies, bypassing the need to "locate close to a concentration of other specialized firms and professionals, who can be called upon in short order to perform particular tasks" (Kotkin, 2000: 120-121). Kotkin uses the entertainment and multimedia based clusters in Los Angeles and New York as examples of new decentralized production paradigms, but those industries have a much smaller geographic scope of decentralization and are remaining beholden to their immediate locations for production and distribution efforts. Saddle Creek Records' success largely comes as a command and control node and not as a vertically integrated corporation updates Bell's notion that the traditional cultural production hubs for music, New York and Los Angeles are diminishing in importance.

While geographic freedom from New York and Los Angeles existed for the formation of indie rock scenes, to become economically viable on a grand scale, those scenes needed to rely on the “smart money” from major labels in New York and Los Angeles to arrive via A&R reps. These reps provided contracts ensuring access to the machinations needed to propel an indie rock band into a higher level of success (Bell, 1998: 189). Due to the aspatialization of the industry fostered by inexpensive technology, an indie rock scene can now become successful artistically as well as financially in any given location rendering New York and Los Angeles completely peripheral in the entire process. A point that Saddle Creek Records embodies and Jason Kulbel relates in simple fashion: “A label can be really started with one person and a computer, and an Internet hook-up, and one band, and a CD to press. Next thing you know, you have a label” (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006).

A Reduced Cost-of-Living is of Significant Importance in the Retention of Cultural Producers in Omaha

The cost-of-living in Omaha is inexpensive in comparison to other metropolitan areas. This fact has been discussed in the mainstream media: “Because Omaha is a cheap place to live — a 1,300-square-foot loft in the Old Market rents for \$575 a month — he and his musicians are spared the financial anxiety of places like New York and L.A.” (Andersen, 2007: 64), as well as easily quantifiable for comparison (Fig. 19). But, when sample group participants were asked if this was a factor in the decision to live in Omaha, results for this hypothesis were mixed. When the question was posed to artists involved in developing Omaha’s indie rock scene (both directly and indirectly through previously published interviews), the answer to the question unanimously

was that Omaha's lower cost of living was vital to their remaining in Omaha and being able to create. Musician Joel Peterson stated:

Because the cost of living is so cheap, we can actually afford to actually be a band here. We don't have to have day jobs and we can work all day, every day on the band and doing various things (Walters, 2005).

Fellow Omaha musician Chris Hughes echoes this with similar sentiments and goes further to illuminate the fact that bands can remain in Omaha and be viable competitors in the global marketplace:

A lot of Omaha bands they've got adequate place, places to practice. They have low living expenses. There are less stresses that would burden someone.... They are going to stay here. They are going to stick it out. Because a lot of them, they toured, they came back and they learned. I don't have to live in city "A," "B," "C," "D" to make myself. We are making a decent living; we are getting international attention; and we have not left our hometowns (Walters, 2005).

When asked if cost-of-living was a factor in his decision to live and create music in Omaha musician Steve Bartolomei simply stated that "Yes, rent is cheap" (S. Bartolomei, personal communication, January 3, 2007).

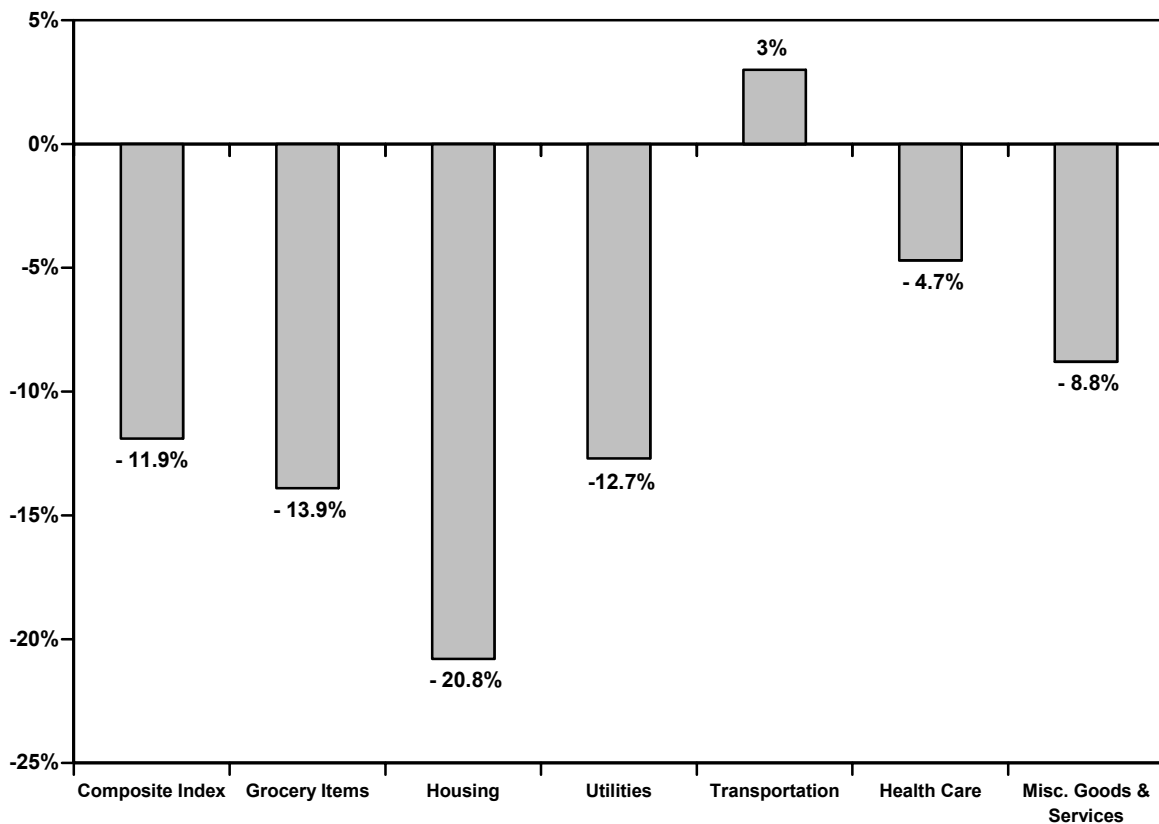


Figure 19. Cost-of-living: Omaha vs. United States, Q2 - 2006 (0% representing national baseline).
Source: ACCRA Cost of Living Index

While the artists' answers fall directly in line with previous research concerning the need for inexpensive space in order for the development of cultural production hubs (Lloyd, 2004; Markusen and King, 2003), Steve Bartolomei's answer to another survey question points towards additional reasoning for cultural producers to remain in or move to Omaha. When asked in a survey, "What are the reasons why you have chosen to live in Omaha as opposed to another city?" Bartolomei responded: "Omaha is my home, my family is here, and it is easy to live here. (Expenses are low, friends are supportive)" (S. Bartolomei, personal communication, January 3, 2007). The mention of "friends" and "family" is much more representative of the responses given by the sample subjects who are entrepreneurs involved with the Slowdown redevelopment project.

In terms of Saddle Creek Records, the attractiveness of Omaha's low cost-of-living/cost-of-doing-business is important. Label Manager, Jason Kulbel responded in an interview on the subject with the following: "Oh yeah, without a doubt. I can't say that was anything that attracted us to here, but I can say that it was something that attracted us to stay here. Without a doubt, it is really cheap here" (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006). But if one were to look closer at Saddle Creek Records, and isolate the entrepreneurs behind it, Omaha's affordability becomes less of an issue. Unlike the artists involved in Omaha's indie rock scene, Jason Kulbel did not initially stay in Omaha. Kulbel, who is one half of the development partnership responsible for Slowdown (Saddle Creek Records is a wholly separate entity) originally left Omaha for Los Angeles in 1998, returning in 2000 for the specific purpose of starting a music venue with his friend and Saddle Creek Records label owner, Robb Nansel. Omaha native Rachel Jacobson returned to Omaha from New York City due to Jason Kulbel and Robb Nansel keeping in contact and offering her the opportunity to start Film Streams (a regional non-profit cinema and film education program) as part of Slowdown. In both cases, neither entrepreneur decided to relocate to Omaha due to cost-of-living factors. Each claimed that their reason for returning was due to a personal connection with Omaha that was sustained through continued contact with friends who remained in the city. Each also recognized the development potential Omaha held for their respective entrepreneurial ventures in comparison to the major market cities where they were located (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006; August 6, 2006; R. Jacobson, personal communication, July 26, 2006).

This return migration trend could be looked upon as an American twist to the "brain circulation" scenario observed by AnnaLee Saxenian (2005). Although Saxenian looks at return migration in terms of international flows, specifically tech workers who circulate through

America, then return home to become entrepreneurs and employees in India and China, her observations are very similar in nature to what was observed in this case study: After spending a length of time in the larger, more dynamic city to which one has migrated, due to communication technologies dually becoming more affordable and more advanced allowing for larger and richer information flows, theoretical propinquity increases until the point where one can enjoy access to the same business and cultural opportunities from any arbitrary place. Realizing this and returning to Omaha (for friends, family, a lower cost-of-living, less competitive marketplace, etc...), the return migrant can utilize the knowledge and connections he or she has obtained while living in the larger market for the benefit of Omaha. In terms of an Omahaian theoretical propinquity, Rachel Jacobson's observations of artists returning to the city directly support the notion of it in regards to the arts:

You can live in Omaha now and still be connected to the contemporary art world.... I recently visited (NYC) and thought that I would feel like I was out of it, but I didn't. Living in Omaha now, I am as aware of everything that is going on in New York City through things like the Internet. It is no longer the case that you have to live in London or New York to be aware of what is going on culturally R. Jacobson, personal communication, February 8, 2007).

In a stricter business sense, the return of Kulbel and Jacobson to Omaha is much in line with the phenomenon Saxenian (2005) noted of Israeli entrepreneurs returning to their home country and creating a new Silicon Valley like technological center. Like Kulbel and Jacobson, the returning Israeli entrepreneurs built on existing skills and resources of their home area. They leveraged their already robust advanced military research to develop new opportunities in technology and communications. Kulbel and Jacobson brought their knowledge of the

entertainment industry gained from living in the traditional cultural production hubs of New York and Los Angeles and applied it while building on the existing skills and resources associated with Omaha's thriving indie rock scene. Saxenian writes:

Returning entrepreneurs are ideally positioned to identify appropriate market niches, mobilize domestic skill and knowledge, connect to international markets, and work with domestic policymakers to identify and devise strategies to overcome obstacles to future growth (Saxenian, 2005: 40).

Although it could be argued that "international" should or shouldn't be changed to "existing domestic" depending on how Slowdown's future presence is felt in regards to tourism, hosting international bands in the venue, or international filmmakers and their films in the cinema, the passage perfectly describes what Kulbel and Jacobson brought to the Slowdown redevelopment project. The next hypothesis will give light as to how they worked with "domestic" policy makers.

Representatives of the City of Omaha were Cooperative in the Slowdown Redevelopment Process

The Slowdown redevelopment project is a significant part of Omaha's efforts to revitalize the North Downtown segment of the city. This significance is due in no small part to the high level of cooperation that representatives of the City of Omaha provided from the initial planning stages. For the purpose of this case study, individuals from the City of Omaha and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce are both considered to be representatives on behalf of the City of Omaha as they cooperatively functioned with the common goal of enabling Jason Kulbel and Robb Nansel (as both representatives of Saddle Creek Records as well as independent developers) to complete the Slowdown project.

Initially, neither Nansel nor Kulbel sought to involve the City or the Chamber in developing Slowdown. Their original plan was to locate the project in a neighborhood further away from downtown, but neighborhood reaction against the plan was so strong, they ultimately decided to shelve the idea. However, a member of the city's planning department was present at the first ill-fated neighborhood meeting concerning Slowdown. At the end of the meeting, he introduced himself and offered the support and services of the planning department. Within a month, Nansel and Kulbel decided to work with the planning department and ultimately the mayor's office in locating Slowdown in another part of the city. Although ultimately wanting Slowdown in the North Downtown location, planning department representatives offered a large list of alternatives for Nansel and Kulbel to investigate. Eventually, the North Downtown area site was chosen. Of working with representatives of the City of Omaha, Kulbel remarked, "The city has been nothing but helpful" (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006). Along with site selection assistance, the City of Omaha offered \$1.3 million in Tax Incremental Financing over 15 years, a "sweetheart deal" on the land, and help with navigating the remediation process for the land (a former brownfield) between its former owners, Union Pacific Railroad, and its new developers (J. Kulbel, personal communication, June 15, 2006). The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce also helped in site selection as well as tenant recruitment efforts (R. Maglinger, personal communication, February 9, 2007).

Why was all this cooperation coming from government officials to developers with no prior history of such activities and no prior business background other than running an indie rock record label? Holly Kruse states that:

In the wake of early 1990's media hype about the Seattle music scene (and earlier waves of publicity about music scenes in Athens, Georgia; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Austin,

Texas; and elsewhere), it is certainly conceivable that local governments in the US might consider investing in music scenes in order to create outside interest in their localities (Kruse, 1998: 197).

Were city officials manifesting Kruse's observations or were they operating in reaction to Richard Florida's (2002) notions of how to attract and retain a young pool of highly educated workers partially through cultural development, notably fostering an indie rock scene? In light of the qualitative findings, both are true, with representatives of the City of Omaha acting in a manner suggested by Markusen and King (2003) for a more holistic view of funding for the arts:

Currently, large new performing arts facilities tend to receive disproportionate shares of the public dollar, because they are supported by well-organized and energetic elites who lobby effectively. Smaller more diverse cultural organizations, artists' live-work space and artists' clubhouses receive paltry amounts of money in contrast, though they are the breeding grounds and experimental stages for future artists and make important contributions to their neighborhoods and the overall diverse character of a city (Markusen and King, 2003: 21).

By offering TIF assistance to Slowdown, the City is helping to diversify the nature and scope of financing for the arts, which in recent years has included significantly larger projects such as the Holland Performing Arts Center and the Qwest Center. However, in addition to cooperation from the City in terms of the larger projects, Omaha's corporate citizens also contribute in terms of financing, in some cases providing the majority of it (R. Moseman, personal communication, February 9, 2007).

The crux of the cooperation on the part of Omaha's city officials in regards to Slowdown is by and large the desire to foster cultural production in terms of their indie rock scene in order

to better help Omaha's marketing efforts and retention of a younger demographic. Both angles are addressed in the following answer provided by the Mayor of Omaha's Chief of Staff, Paul Landow:

We're interested in young people who grew-up here deciding to stay here either in order to go to college; or, when they're done with college, come back here and live. We're also interested in young people from around the country looking at Omaha as an attractive place to come and work and live (P. Landow, personal communication, June 28, 2006).

The Office of the Mayor was well aware of the city's indie rock scene and took strides to "informally encourage it to flourish" and specifically got involved with the Slowdown redevelopment project after "a decision was made that we needed to find them a spot and create an environment where we can maintain that business in our city and help them grow their business...conducive to the goals of the city as well as their needs" (P. Landow, personal communication, June 28, 2006).

Initially, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce also saw the city's indie rock scene and Saddle Creek Records as marketing tools for the city with the Slowdown project functioning as a beacon that would attract visitors and residents to the North Downtown area. But as work continued on the redevelopment project, it became apparent that the same retention and attraction qualities of the indie rock scene and Saddle Creek Records imbued in the Slowdown project translated onto a national landscape in terms of attracting retail. Eager to align themselves with the Saddle Creek brand, and by default the newly emerging Omaha brand, companies looking to be involved in the project contacted the Chamber:

We met with a couple of companies that wanted to be associated with Saddle Creek and they were trying to come in and Saddle Creek was in a position to say 'yea' or 'nay':

‘Yes,’ we think you should be a part of this project, or, ‘no’ we don’t think it’s a good fit. So, Saddle Creek itself was kind of a magnet for some of these other, I can’t give away the names of who we talked to, but they were probably companies that would not ever have looked at Omaha based on the demographics, but they came and they told us that they were just here because of Saddle Creek (R. Maglinger, personal communication, February 9, 2007).

Cooperation on the part of representatives from the City of Omaha was definitely intrinsic to the Slowdown project becoming a reality. And while that cooperation falls in line with previously published speculation on the benefits of potential interaction between city government and indie rock scenes, the question of *at what point* were Omaha city representatives aware of their scene remains unanswered. In all questioning, the level of interest is strong when the Slowdown project took its first, ill-fated step. There is no acknowledgement of the scene prior to that point. There are also no strategies in place to foster future music scenes, which may or may not be a negative situation in reference to the literature (Cohen, 2001; Frith, 1993; Street, 1993) that suggests too much state intrusion may cause more harm than good. However, when considering the Slowdown project, cooperation on behalf of city representatives was a definite factor in how a successful indie rock scene can be an urban redevelopment catalyst.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Summary

Urban redevelopment and the arts have had a long association. From the 1960's until present day, cities such as New York have seen their physical landscapes redeveloped in response to fine artists, their activities, and the economic forces that follow them. As decades pass, cities functioning as traditional cultural production hubs are witnessing a rise in cost-of-living that is affecting a key ingredient in cultural production, affordable space. As the traditional cultural production hubs become less affordable for artists, smaller cities are becoming more attractive to artists and are starting to function as untraditional cultural production hubs. This is evidenced in terms of a relatively new form of cultural production, independent rock or, "indie rock."

Due to a significant rise in popularity of the rock sub-genre, indie rock, and changes in the way in which the music industry produces, distributes, and markets its product, entrepreneurs involved in indie rock scenes are, in some cases, starting to see a precipitous rise in levels of financial success, specifically those involved with record labels. These indie rock record labels operate independently of the mainstream "major label" system and are the basis for the sub-genre being labeled, "indie." One of the most successful indie labels currently is Saddle Creek Records located in Omaha, Nebraska — one of a new breed of untraditional cultural production hubs dotting the American landscape. Prior to now, government involvement in the development of successful indie rock scenes in America has been nascent at best. However, literature pre-dating Omaha's rise in status as an indie rock stronghold suggests that with the success of scenes in places like Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Athens, Georgia, perhaps

government leaders should take notice of what could be a powerful marketing tool for their cities.

As has been shown historically, the overwhelming trend for the interaction of successful cultural production hubs and the urban landscape is ultimately to the benefit of the urban landscape and to the detriment to the cultural producers. The participants in the arts agglomerations that make the area in which they operate successful often become marginalized by the residual real estate value increases their presence has provided. In the case of Omaha, the situation is different as the arts agglomeration is indie rock based, not fine arts, and the impact on the urban landscape in which they reside is artist led and not artist fed and has not served to marginalize any of the participants. The Slowdown urban redevelopment project — a mixed-use, 56,000 square foot center which will house Saddle Creek Records, a non-profit cinema, apartments, retail, a club, and restaurant establishments — is the first urban redevelopment project resulting from a successful indie rock scene.

Findings

To build a case study on how an indie rock scene can become an urban redevelopment catalyst, it was important to look at three main areas of study in a largely quantitative manner. First, changes in the music industry due to technology were explored and resulted in the fact that Saddle Creek Records was able to grow in scope in a financially efficient way due to the Internet providing marketing outlets for their product and e-mail allowing for an inexpensive means of business communication in their prolonged start-up period. The need for affordable space was addressed by examining whether or not Omaha's lower cost-of-living and cost-of-doing business were factors in the retention and attraction of cultural producers. In terms of the artists involved,

Omaha's lower cost-of-living was a significant factor in being able to focus on creating and developing as successful cultural producers. When the same question was posed to the entrepreneurs in the sample, cost-of-living and cost-of-doing-business were not significant factors in their return to Omaha. For the entrepreneurs, the main drawing point to return to Omaha was the contact they kept with other cultural producers in Omaha. Both entrepreneurs in the study's sample population who were directly involved with the development of the Slowdown project left Omaha for traditional cultural production hubs, gained knowledge in these locations, then returned to Omaha in order to apply that knowledge in business situation with friends involved in the city's indie rock scene. This situation recalls prior research completed concerning similar international circulatory networks of social and business contacts that have served to help high tech agglomerations form in regions not traditionally known for such activity. The final area of study to examine was governmental interaction. As prior research pointed out clearly, indie rock scenes were not even a blip on the radar for the governments in their respective cities. And, there was very little research to detail that, with the previous statement being more of an inference due to the absence of writing concerning it. However, when considering Omaha and the development of a \$10.2 million dollar building led by entrepreneurs in the city's indie rock scene, it appeared possible that representatives were in some way cooperating with the project. Indeed, that is what this study's research uncovered. The city cooperated quite a bit in terms of everything from financing with TIF funds being offered to general advising and red tape cutting. The reasoning behind this heretofore-unprecedented cooperation was for both the retention of the younger demographic in Omaha as well as in order to help market the city as a viable relocation spot for young people across the country.

Through the research conducted in this case study, it is evident that in Omaha an indie rock scene became an urban redevelopment catalyst because the following three situations were present: The entrepreneurs involved in the indie rock scene leveraged technological changes in the music industry to their advantage and built a successful indie rock record label; there existed a lower cost-of-living (resulting in affordable space) that helped to retain cultural producers involved in the indie rock scene; and representatives of the City of Omaha were cooperative in moving forward the entrepreneurs' plans of building the redevelopment project in question.

Implications

This case study serves as another general step for research concerning the arts and urban redevelopment, and as a more specific step furthering work by Richard Florida, Holly Kruse, and Richard Lloyd concerning American indie rock scenes and their holistic impacts on host cities. The broadest implication of this case study is that due in part to the technologically fueled aspatialization and leveling of the music industry playing field, what has happened in Omaha in terms of developing a world recognized and financially successful indie rock scene can happen largely anywhere (in pure geographic terms) in America. If, in addition to Johansson and Bell's (2005) proposed stipulations discussed earlier in this paper, a city elicits a lower cost of living, has entrepreneurs and artists involved in the creation of an indie rock scene, and employs representatives who are aware of and cooperative with entrepreneurs involved in the scene, there exists the possibility of that indie rock scene becoming a catalyst for urban redevelopment. The city would not only have the potential to benefit from urban redevelopment, but as evidenced by this case study, return migration by a desired demographic.

For city representatives to foster an indie rock scene that could possibly result in successful urban redevelopment, the first step would be a simple awareness of activity in their local scene. Once awareness is established, the next step would be to identify and establish a dialogue with those intrinsic to the scene's operations, be it as entrepreneurs, performers, or those who document the activities of the scene in both print and online mediums. By opening a dialogue with those in the midst of the local scene, city officials can learn, much as they did in Omaha, what city resources readily available might benefit local entrepreneurs and performers. While in the case of Omaha, the first efforts of the city to get involved in their already globally recognized local indie rock scene played out in a successful urban redevelopment project, in other cities smaller steps and results may be more realistic and attainable, i.e. offering to block off a street in order to facilitate an annual music festival or perhaps helping a local club owner to navigate bureaucracy in a more timely fashion. Whatever the scope of the involvement, by being aware of the local indie rock scene and opening channels of dialogue, city representatives can begin to foster at no (or very little) cost a potential arts-based urban redevelopment catalyst.

Further Research Recommendations

The most important recommendation that can be made is for continued research to be completed regarding this case study. Due to limitations in distance, time, and resources, this case study was much smaller in scope than it could have been. The sample population studied was small in size and the factors influencing the creation and sustaining of Omaha's indie rock scene might be studied more in-depth. For example, Omaha's numerous corporate entities provide a healthy amount of employment opportunities for residents of the city. Is easy access to employment (or a "day job") a significant factor in the retention of cultural producers in Omaha?

Will the frequency of return migration increase as Omaha continues to develop its cultural production hub status? By continuing to examine the genesis (and lifespan) of Slowdown, Saddle Creek Records, and Omaha's indie rock scene, a larger sample population may be gained and a richer contextual fabric may be derived.

Even in the limited scope of this case study, while investigating answers to the hypotheses, a rather large question was raised: what defines success in regards to the Slowdown project? Across the board, those involved in the project responded that the fact that it would be built and the doors opened constituted success. And while this certainly represents a level of success, the sustaining of an entertainment-based urban structure (and more broadly, the entertainment district slated to surround it) is a dynamic interplay amongst venue(s), retail, government representatives, artists, and patrons. While some cities have managed to sustain entertainment districts with varying levels of success, one needs only to look at the cyclical boom and bust scenario of Dallas, Texas' Deep Ellum entertainment district for an example of a problematic redevelopment project once met with initial success. Research into the life-spans of music-based entertainment districts would be of great use to the people involved in the monitoring of Slowdown and the North Downtown area as well as for those cities that may find themselves in the position of contemplating the feasibility of creating and sustaining one in light of their own successful indie rock scenes.

More could be learned about the importance of the cost-of-living variable introduced in this case study. On a national scale, it would be illuminating to examine other successful indie rock scenes over a specified time period and compare their host cities' cost-of-living indexes a few years before the scenes hit critical mass and a few years after. A resulting correlation amongst the cities could serve to underscore the importance of affordable space and indie rock

based cultural production. In addition, any correlation between a successful indie rock scene and resulting escalations in cost-of-living may offer additional insight into the interplay between the arts and gentrification.

Ultimately, it is important that geographical analysis of urban redevelopment in light of the music industry continue as their respective evolutions often intersect providing for diverse, spatially motivated opportunities in both realms. “What, for instance, might be the connections between suburbanization in the USA and developments in rock music from the 1960’s onward, or the revitalization of Chicago’s business and warehouse districts on house music?” (Jones, 2002: 229). Omaha’s indie rock scene physically changing the city’s urban landscape is one more connection between music and the urban environment, a connection facilitated by geography, both economic and cultural.

APPENDIX
QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaire for Saddle Creek Representative

1. Name and position in Saddle Creek?
2. Does the label still operate as an indie label free from major label ownership interest?
3. Why choose Omaha as the location to start Saddle Creek? Was it the community of people? Any specific features of the city most important?
4. Was Omaha's cost-of-living and/or cost-of-doing business a factor in starting and keeping Saddle Creek in Omaha as opposed to the more historically traditional locations of NY or LA?
5. Were any venues, record stores, recording studios or other locations important for the development of Saddle Creek and the artists on the label? If so, for what reason were they important?
6. What role has the Internet played, if any, in allowing Saddle Creek to remain located in Omaha while competing in a global market? (Communication? Marketing? Sales?)
7. Have you found the Internet operating somewhat as a replacement for radio and MTV as a way to introduce Saddle Creek artists to wider audiences?
8. How important are independent publicists to Saddle Creek and where are they located geographically? Or, does Saddle Creek have staff publicists?
9. How important was Saddle Creek's deal with ADA (Alternative Distribution Alliance) for the growth of the label?
10. Why did Saddle Creek decide to branch out into a development project?
11. How were city officials involved in the process and to what extent? Were county and state officials involved?
12. Were there any development incentives offered by the city, county, or state for Slowdown?
13. How important are they to Slowdown?
14. Will the physical extension of Saddle Creek seek to employ the same "independent" ethos as the core business?
15. Where do you see Slowdown in ten years? Do you envision more than one?
16. Will there be space in Slowdown allotted to musicians at below market rates?

Questionnaire for Omaha City Representatives

1. Does the city have a specific Economic Development strategy that includes the promotion of live music and venues? If “yes,” examples of events and goals
2. Has the city provided support for the development of live music events and venues? Use of parks, public parking, assistance with advertising, tax incentives (hotel or car tax, ala Austin), below market rent for city facilities...
3. How did the Slowdown project come to the attention of city officials?
4. What incentives were offered by the city to help facilitate the development of Slowdown?
5. How does the Slowdown project fit within the city’s overall Economic Development goals? Is Slowdown one piece of a broader strategy? What are the other elements? Is it location dependent? Cluster based?
6. Do you have plans for monitoring the progress of Slowdown? What will the city’s ongoing role be with Slowdown? Keep it vibrant, economically viable...
7. What support will be offered to other similar projects? If not, why Slowdown?
8. How would you define success for the city of Omaha in relation to the Slowdown project?

Questionnaire for Film Streams Representative

1. Name and position in Film Streams?
2. Why choose Omaha? Was it the community of people? Any specific features of the city most important?
3. Was Omaha's cost-of-living and/or cost-of-doing business a factor in starting Film Streams in Omaha as opposed to the more historically traditional locations of NY or LA?
4. Have you found Omaha's population to be positive in terms of patronizing the arts both monetarily and in terms of attendance?
5. What role has the Internet played, if any, in allowing Film Streams to develop in Omaha? (Communication? Marketing? Sales?)
6. How were city officials involved in the process (and to what extent) of bringing Film Streams to Slowdown? Were county and state officials involved?
7. Were there any development incentives offered by the city, county, or state for Slowdown?
8. Will Film Streams seek to employ the same "independent" ethos as Saddle Creek?
9. Where do you see Film Streams in ten years? Do you envision more than one?

Questionnaire for Omaha Musicians

1. How long have you lived in Omaha?
2. How long have you been involved with music in Omaha?
3. What are the reasons why you have chosen to live in Omaha as opposed to another city?
4. Is there any one person (or band) residing in Omaha that influenced you to stay in the city and pursue music? If so, how did he/she/they influence you?
5. Are there any locations (venues, coffee shops, record stores) that influenced you to stay in the city and pursue music? If so, how did they influence you?
6. Are there any factors in Omaha that help you to create music?
7. Is cost-of-living a factor in your decision to live and create music in Omaha?
8. Have you considered a move to another city in order to focus on creating music? (If “Yes,” go to question 9. If “No,” questionnaire finished.)
9. Which city or cities have you considered?
10. What factors have so far deterred you from moving?

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